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Performing new worlds? Policy, politics and creative labour in hard times

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Abstract

This paper addresses the theme of this special issue by offering critical reflections on public policy in the current period of cuts, austerity and retrenchment, while also offering pathways towards future possibilities. It explores current strategies of divestment, design and decentralisation, assessing the scope within each for creative enactments and alternative pathways. It then explores 'public-making' as a means of countering the affective consequences of austerity, and traces some of the numerous forms 'border work' at stake in attempts to mitigate its consequences. Finally the paper explores the troubled relationship between progressive policy enactments and neoliberal appropriations.

Keywords: austerity; performance; design; local; publics; border work; neoliberalism.

Introduction

This paper addresses the problem of how to engage with the politics of public policy in the current period of cuts, austerity and retrenchment. As Hay and Wincott (2012) argue, the slow pace of economic recovery in Britain and beyond means that hard times are likely to continue, with further pressure on welfare provision and public services. But what does this mean for our understanding of public policy? Can the theoretical frameworks developed for analysing the New Labour years in the UK suffice? The paper takes up the challenge of this Special Issue by offering critical reflections on the implications of austerity governance for the politics of the policy process. But it also argues that critical reflections are insufficient, and goes on to explore the potential of new methods, new actors, and new framings of the policy process to generate new solutions, and to suggest how far actors with 'progressive'

social or political commitments are able to enact new worlds within the confines of the present.

Such questions form the basis of this paper. Contemporary re-framings of the policy process are discussed in a series of short sections whose aim is to provoke ideas and critical dialogue rather than to offer a full account (or critique) of the topic concerned. By bringing them together in a single paper I hope to suggest both potential synergies and important disjunctures. The paper then assesses how alternative rationalities and scripts might be performed against this backdrop. As established institutional pathways are fractured there may be some space for 'progressive' interventions to take shape. A final section revisits the vexed question of how far new and emergent performances might be considered as sites of governmentalisation and neoliberal appropriation, and how far they might constitute new terrains of political engagement.

Reframing the policy process

Austerity is not of course a new topic in the political and policy literatures (see for example Clarke and Newman, 2012; Farnsworth, 2011; Jordan and Drakeford, 2012; Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012; Richardson, 2010, Taylor-Goody and Stoker, 2011, and special issue of *Critical Social Policy*: 32, 3, 2012). But my focus here is the implications of austerity for how the policy *process* is framed in the UK. While others have argued that existing theories of public administration and governance are sufficiently resilient (Kelly and Dodds, 2012) this paper offers a more sceptical approach. I want to briefly refer to three developments, all conveniently beginning with D, each of which is the focus of multiple enactments of policy and politics. **Divest** involves the stripping away of governing functions – not just service delivery - from the state itself. This is not a new dynamic; previous decades saw extensive academic engagement with processes of marketisation and with the growth of quangos. However divestment stands as the most visible marker of austerity governance and of wider processes of neoliberalisation. The radical disruptions to both governing and service delivery have generated a new concern with **Design**, and recent years have witnessed in expansion of design from its roots in industry and architecture to an engagement with social and public problems. Design contrasts with an older 'planning' tradition, and draws on forms of expertise beyond the state: in consultancies, think tanks, small-scale enterprises, and in the academy, where academics are encouraged to demonstrate the impact of their research on policy and

practice. A third development is **Decentralise.** While this appears to offer a spatial metaphor, bringing governance closer to communities of 'ordinary people', it is primarily concerned with attempts to realise assets beyond the state. Despite the fate of the Big Society as a political slogan, it remains the hope of the UK government that local communities will, if freed from the shackles of the Big State, be enabled and empowered to develop creative responses to the problems they – and others – face. Decentralisation is of course not wholly distinct from either divestment (local community actors are encouraged to take over formerly public assets and to challenge the *public* delivery of local services) or design (most design interventions advocate a localised and decentralised approach to citizen involvement and behaviour change). However I view decentralisation as a paradigm in its own right because it offers a distinct pathway to governance beyond the state.

There is, of course, much more going on that the 3 D's can encompass – we might, for example, extend the analysis to include Digitisation and Deregulation. But the three I have focused on suggest some of the ways in which austerity governance is taking shape, and help surface the contradictions at stake as governments struggle to position themselves as efficient and prudent economic managers while retaining electoral support; that is between technocratic and politicised forms of governing. They each also challenge existing narratives of governance established before the financial crisis took shape. The dominant narratives for the last decades have centred on the shifting relationships between state and market, the fate of the New Public Management and the rise of network governance. However narratives that looked beyond the NPM to models of network governance, partnerships and participation now seem a little beside the point. In the UK, networks are being torn apart as a product of deliberate processes of 'disintermediation', stripping away layers and returning services to their 'core business'. Inter-organisational partnerships are no longer a desirable norm; rather new configurations are emerging as organisations establish joint back office functions and call centres, while 'failing' organisations are becoming subject to take-over by those deemed to be successful. The language of partnership has been displaced by that of co-production, with users and communities invited to be involved in both the design and delivery of services, or taking over formerly public assets and services. And the Conservative Party's hoped for Big Society, which attempted to discursively reframe the policy domain from a state/market binary to a concern with state/society dynamics, proved unsustainable in the context of the stripping away of the infrastructure of voluntary sector, NGOs

and local governance that might have sustained it (Alcock, 2012, New Economics Foundation nd1, 2).

This all presents a fairly grim picture. However in the remainder of this paper I want to explore what the spaces might be for radical or progressive interventions. Each of the developments I have touched on here – divest, design and devolve – opens up particular questions. For example processes of *divestment* raise the question about how far 'progressive' voices should call for the restoration of what many viewed as deeply flawed state provision, or should look to new models for future public services that offer greater flexibility and diversity. The turn to *design* opens up space for different kinds of expertise – including that of citizens and service users – to help construct possible future pathways. But it might also be viewed as simply the means of delivering greater cost savings. And processes of *devolution* raise questions about how far the localization of policy and services can offer progressive forms of political renewal in an era of growing spatial inequalities. In what follows, then, I do not want to offer an overly optimistic picture, and the examples I refer to are unlikely to be longstanding. But my aim is to turn some attention (empirical as well as political) to sources of creative labour and to new sites and forms of political agency which might help to configure prefigurative pathways towards a post-austerity politics.

Performing new worlds?

Re-framings of the policy landscape, from network governance to co-production, from partnership to participation, tend to become the focus both of enthusiasm (about the opening up the field to new actors and ideas) and of profound pessimism (reducing all to yet another example of neoliberal governance). In an attempt to open out a terrain of productive critique, I want to raise two questions about how innovations (including those associated with the three 'Ds') might be assessed. One concerns the relationship between ideas and policy enactments, while the second explores the wider political implications of what appear to be politically neutral or normatively desirable interventions. In developing the first of these arguments, I want to draw attention to the ways in which policy may be considered as a form of performance. Performances may be spontaneous (a practice made up to deal with a tricky situation or new challenge) or rehearsed (developed through dialogue with others or perhaps shaped by a director). They may follow a script (the policy text) but may offer new interpretations and translations, or may abandon the script altogether. They may deliberately rupture expectations, or may follow established traditions.

They are, however, embodied and affective rather than simply discursive; performance offers a conception of policy as lived and enacted, albeit within cultural and material constraints.

The paper, then, is influenced in part by performance studies: a growing field that encompasses the study of cultural forms (texts, the visual arts, architecture and so on) but also draws on studies of embodiment, action, behaviour and agency (Schechner, 1985). Performance studies look back to Goffman (1959/93), but current developments encompass work on aesthetic labour (Jackson, 2011) and post-structuralist theories of performativity (Butler, 1990, 2010). The latter are particularly relevant for my argument since they show how new policy models, theories and texts may be constitutive in their effect: that is, they have a capacity to bring into being, to enact and embody, the worlds they describe. This resonates with academic work on the role of social science in enacting, rather than simply describing, the social (Law and Urry, 2004). Of particular note is the contribution of Gibson-Graham (1996, 2006; Gibson-Graham and Roelvink, 2011) whose studies of alternative economic forms and experiments show how new worlds can be enacted within the confines of apparently hegemonic economic systems. They propose a model of collective action in which 'collective' is not the massing together of like subjects but a broad and distributed entity that includes those engaged in theory building alongside, and in collaboration with, participants in particular projects. And their 'action' is viewed as having a performative force, surfacing tacit knowledge and bringing it to bear on what they term 'world changing experiments' (2006: 166).

Here I am concerned with forms of collective action that help generate new performances within the constraints of the present, and how those with a commitment to progressive politics might engage with the policy process in hard times. My use of 'progressive' here denotes those with a commitment to social and political change who do not stop short at criticizing what already exists but who also attempt to create alternatives (see also Roseneil, 2012). This interest comes out of my own recent research, which explored the experiences of women had taken activist commitments into their working lives, developing new rationalities through community projects, in local governments, the civil service, think tanks, political parties, trades unions, the academy and the creative industries (Newman, 2012a). I used the term *Working the Spaces of Power* to show how women had worked the borders between government policy and personal commitments in a period spanning the 1950s to 2012 (extended into 2013 though a series of informal workshops and

discussions[1]). This multi-generational research showed how older generations had helped bring the politics of feminism and other social movements into the professions of the expanding welfare state. Some of those confronting the adversarial politics of the 1980s recalled an ethos of working 'in and against' the state,[2] creating pockets of radicalism and resistance where they could. In the Blair years of the 1990s participants in the research had helped shape the focus on joined up government, partnership and participation, while others used the 'invited spaces' these had created to expand the scope for progressive interventions. In the present many younger – and older – women are opening up new forms of activism, mobilising against the cuts, taking part in the Occupy movement, feminist and antiracist struggles, global social justice campaigns and/or environmental politics. Some are becoming 'social entrepreneurs' within the diverse marketplace for public goods, while those still occupying governance or service roles are seeking to mitigate the impact of austerity, trying to make policy less bad than it might otherwise have been. And some are using the developments discussed above – divest, design and decentralise – to create new platforms for their own work and to attempt to appropriate these governmental discourses for more progressive ends.

However the scope for progressive politics to be performed within the constraints of austerity governance is limited. In what follows I assess the scope for such adaptive or disruptive performances and tease out the wider implications of austerity governance.

Divest: the politics of 'diversity'

As noted earlier, austerity governance is characterized by the divestment of services and governance functions away from the state[3]. This is not a new process, but in conditions of austerity the market dynamics of the New Public Management are traversed by a divestment of policy and governance functions. For example the UK

[1] For example through the *Feminist Policy, Politics and Practice* forum, jointly convened by myself and Sasha Roseneil, which meets 3 times a year at Birkbeck.

[2] A book of that title was produced by the *London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group,* published by Pluto Press 1979.

[3] See for example the provision of the *Open Public Services White Paper* (Cabinet Office, 2011: cmnd 8145). This had the explicit aim of promoting greater diversity of public service provision, and the *Modernising Commissioning Green Paper* (Cabinet Office, 2010), which sought to open up existing markets to new providers, including civil society organizations.

government is not just commissioning private sector suppliers to deliver major new programmes, but is turning to venture capital bodies to invest in the possibility of future profits by managing the risks of commissioning on its behalf. In local government, outsourcing to the private sector is intensifying as a result of stringent budget cuts, and is increasingly concerned with governing and planning functions. And the commissioning role is itself increasingly shared with service providers. There are many other examples of divestment, from the sale of public assets to non-state providers to the proliferation of new models of hybrid organization in health, schooling and other services. As well as reducing accountability and opening up new forms of marketisation, such developments introduce greater fragmentation of services (see for example Toynbee's analysis of the effects of the opening out of the NHS to 'any provider': Guardian 12/10/12 p 33). But they also disrupt governance and policymaking: for example in June 2012 the UK Cabinet Secretary proposed that policy making itself should become more open and 'contestable' by commissioning non-government actors - for example think tanks or academics - to take on policy tasks formerly limited to civil servants. The compound effect of such developments, we might argue, is to make it increasingly difficult to 'steer' policy from the centre.

As was the case under New Labour, divestment is framed within an ideological politics that blurs diversification (of suppliers) and the expansion of diversity (of organizational forms and of consumer choice). Certainly new organsiational forms are proliferating: mutuals, cooperatives, so called 'free' schools, foundation trusts, social enterprises and so on. Divestment is also enabling voluntary and civil society organizations, faith groups and charities to take on more extensive service delivery roles. However it has generated a range of different responses and experiments that are not easily evaluated. The Birmingham Policy Commission notes a number of challenges raised by the diversification agenda in local government (University of Birmingham, 2011). One is the development of a more segmented approach to service provision. This may be user driven but tends to overlooks wider social and economic questions of cohesion and economic or environmental well-being. A second is the subordination of democratic concerns resulting from the increased complexity of commissioning arrangements and delivery networks. A third is the shift of risks to those least able to bear them, whether small service suppliers or users themselves.

Diversity, then, is an ambiguous goal. It is certainly the case that new actors are entering the marketplace. However, rather than divestment leading to greater

diversity and choice, a dominant dynamic is that of enabling established players (Circo, Capita, Price Waterhouse and others) to consolidate and expand their market position as public service providers. For example a majority of the GP consortia have decided to pursue the voluntary outsourcing of the management of NHS commissioning bodies, further expanding the remit of large corporate players rather than increasing diversity. This process has not gone uncontested: several radical outsourcing programmes in local government have met with widespread opposition, and some chief executives and council leaders have either reversed earlier policies or stepped down from their roles as a means of registering their opposition (Guardian, 17/10/12, 15). This suggests some possible gap between governmental programmes and local responses, and highlights the significance of local authorities as creative and innovative actors (see also Lowndes et al, 2012).

Divestment, it is clear, is not a single process but opens up an unstable field of interests, actors and strategies with unpredictable outcomes. This in turn generates the possibility of creative responses to austerity, albeit at he margins. For example new provisions for public bodies to raise capital from bond markets to fund large projects has enabled some local authorities to secure capital funding for green energy projects (however with resistance from a distrusting central government). Some not-for-profit and community organizations have taken up market opportunities in an attempt to secure their (no doubt temporary) survival in the face of the withdrawal of public funding. Some former state-workers are becoming (or attempting to become) social entrepreneurs, freed from some of the performance requirements of the institutions they used to work for (but facing a much more precarious working life). Alternative economic experiments, including local trading and cooperative enterprises, are flourishing. And the closure of some public services has generated new public mobilisations (for example over threatened library closures) but also radical interventions (the reopening of Friern Barnett library in north London by a group of squatters in September 2012). Some of the participants in my own research are involved in policy oriented, political or campaigning bodies (the Family and Parenting Institute, Compass, UNISON, the Women's Budget Group, and a range of think tanks) from which they can not only to make the effects of cuts visible, but also can develop and enact alternatives.

These emerging performances and enactments (both political and economic) are likely to be short lived, and all are highly contested. But I want to draw out two points from the discussion. First, divestment strategies lead to an expansion of what

Durose, Justice and Skelcher (2012) term 'governing beyond the state'. They argue that, as well as privatising the public realm, this can also serve to publicise the private, opening up the political and governing systems to actors excluded from elite governing networks. This opens up the possibility of appropriations 'from below' of new legislative and policy provisions: forms of appropriation which many of those I interviewed were engaged in. What happens to such actors in the increasingly disorganized marketplace for public goods is of course another matter: new market opportunities opened up by small entrepreneurs and local non-profit providers tend to be readily gobbled up by corporate players, and the risks associated with new forms of 'precarious labour' (Standing, 2011) are high. But second, the analysis shows how neoliberal governance, even in conditions of austerity, has to reach accommodations with other forces and fields (Clarke, 2008). The diversity of actors and spaces that emerge do not, however, necessarily foster greater social and political diversity; the dynamics of neoliberalism not only serve to expand the scope and reach of corporate capital but also deepen the economisation of social life.

Design: the politics of expertise

My focus on design is intended to mark the significance of new forms of expertise in the development and enactment of policy (marked, for example, by the *Redesigning Public Services* report generated by a recent Parliamentary Inquiry: www.policyconnect.org.uk/apdig/design-commission). The traditional planning model of public policy is now traversed by design professionals expanding the remit of design from industry and architecture to policy work, and by a proliferation of interventions by think tanks, consultancies, entrepreneurs, university research centres, policy commissions and NGOs, all part of a post-welfare economy based on the knowledge intensive and creative industries.

Good design (whether of projects, services or social dynamics) is of course a public good in its own right. However design is an ambiguous commodity: it encompasses a range of different purposes and applications. Its methods cover crowd-sourcing (Mindlab 2011), including the use of web 2.0 (Leadbeater and Cottam 2007); experimental methods (Stoker, 2010, Stoker and John, 2009); the development of 'nudge' strategies for changing individual behaviour (John et al 2011) and numerous forms of coproduction. These offer different conceptions of the person, from affective to deliberative subjects, or from individualized economic actors to collective agents. It follow that design also supports a range of different purposes. The dominant claim is

that design can deliver both better outcomes and substantial cost savings (see for example *NESTA*'s paper on securing 'radical efficiency' in local government: Gillinson et al, 2010). Design is frequently utilized to remodel universal or high cost benefits, or to enable local authorities and health services to secure efficiencies by reengineering or streamlining services. However the relationship between costs and outcomes tends not to be addressed.

But design also has strong activist roots. For example *Actant* argue for design to be viewed as a social or public good rather than simply as a means of finding ways to change individual behaviour. They elaborate the affinities between the design paradigm and the Big Society agenda but go on to

> 'wonder whether this seemingly happy union brushes over something important, specifically how particular issues become social problems in the first place…. We argue that Design has to reclaim the value that it places on making social problems visible, understandable and graspable, reminiscent of the stance of earlier designers … who saw their work as a kind of social activism' (Blyth and Kimbell, 2011).

Implicit here is the concept of design as a progressive political methodology that can be performed within the constraints of austerity governance. The ambiguities of design, then, depend not only on the market positioning of the designers but also on their closeness to or distance from government as purchaser of their skills, and on their approach to citizen involvement. Although dominated by corporate players, Several of the participants in my own research (cited earlier) had moved from voluntary organisations or the public sector to work on the redesign of services, either as social entrepreneurs or as members of think-tanks (such as the New Economics Foundaton). Others, working as academics and researchers, were attempting to enable public policy and public service staff to draw on the results of their research to help design better outcomes.

In assessing the capacity of design to open up progressive policy alternatives, we might want to dig beneath the apparent neutrality of its methodologies, rather than being attracted to what appears to be a series of 'post political' policy interventions. To the extent to which it draws on citizen experience and expertise, design is likely to produce better outcomes. But one is left wondering *which* citizens benefit in practice and which are left to suffer from the reduction of resources and imposition of austerity measures. While good design can be viewed as a normative requirement for progressive public services and the development of public goods, the policy

worlds that are constituted through its diverse methodologies are highly diverse and ambiguously public.

Decentralise: the politics of locality

Governmental rhetoric paints am attractive picture of local involvement, action and enterprise flourishing if the state gets out of the way – the Big State is depicted as a handicap and barrier rather than enabler and resource provider. The localism agenda has spawned a range of policies, including the promotion of market mechanisms though the community 'right to buy', the attempt to give local people direct control over neighbourhood services, and the promotion of local action and local self improvement through the work of 'community mobilisers'.[4]

The dominant critiques of the localism agenda in the UK tend to circulate around the effects of continued – and intensified – control from central government, the stripping away of the supporting institutional architecture of local government and voluntary sector (NEF nd2), the opening up of local spaces and services to the private sector, and the weakening of a wider public framework for resource distribution, regulation and control. But my focus is not (only) on critique, but on how the diverse ways in which local may be imagined and performed, and by whom. There is a rich body of literature which centres on the local as a site of solidarities and which offers strategies for mobilizing and empowering local actors to participate, both in solving local problems, in enhancing local capacities and in contributing to the wider polity. Current policies on community mobilisation can be viewed as enactments of such an approach. However austerity may change the conditions in which local connective labour is possible, closing many of the spaces from which it was conducted and shifting the political climate itself to one more closely characterised by political disaffection and dismay.

Furthermore in conditions of austerity the local may be performed as a defensive space, turned in upon itself to protect its particular cultural or physical resources from the incursion of its 'others'. The 'others' may of course be highly diverse. Historic patterns of closure against migrants may be overlaid with attempted closure against

[4] See the provisions of the *Localism Act* (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2011) which included Community Rights (to challenge existing providers of local public services) and Neighbourhood Planning, as well as reforms to housing and local government.

those made homeless, jobless or sick as a result of the economic downturn and benefit cuts. Alternatively the 'other' of defensive strategies may be the supermarket chain seeking to encroach on local space in return for the promise of delivering much needed housing or other public goods. Such differences and specificities suggest the poverty of policy narratives that suggest that if the state retreats, local involvement and action will proliferate in its stead – an imagined relationship widely critiqued (Alcock 2012, Durose 2012, Sullivan, 2012).

However while the rolling back of the state may not itself be a catalyst for the development of civic action, the current political landscape is generating a resurgence of local mobilisations. Many of the women I interviewed are engaged in promoting such mobilisations, supporting a range of community based and civil society projects, some attempting to rework the Big Society agenda, others fostering alternative pathways. The possibilities and limits of these forms of engagement have been highlighted elsewhere: see for example Durose (2012) on the expansion of 'civic entrepreneurialism' in Salford. Durose analyses the work of local brokers: those who form coalitions of people who are able to get things done and keep things going in and around the neighbourhood. She concludes that

> In part, local brokering reflects the aspirations of the Big Society but does so through strategies shaped through local knowledge and also begins to provide means of community resilience, if not resistance (2012: 28).

Such studies point to some of the ways in which the localism agenda is performed in specific places by actors who are adapting their 'front line' public sector, faith based or community development roles to respond to the changing needs and conditions of the communities they serve.

But the specificity of place matters; localities and local authorities vary in the cultural and political resources on which they can draw. In viewing the local as something that is performed in different ways, then, I do not want to imply that such performances take place in isolation from a wider material and cultural contexts. The resources and capacities that enable or constrain particular enactments of the local are significant. So too are the discursive scripts through which new kinds of enactments are summoned. The dominant policy model assumes that solutions are to flow from civil society action, from collaborative redesign, from private sector innovation, from new forms of social entrepreneurship and from the restoration of the traditional ties of interdependence based on family, faith and community. These are of course not necessarily compatible: modern economic individualism sits rather

uneasily with the imaginary solidarities of community, and traditional ties may hinder, rather than enable, the possibility of forging the kinds of connectivity that underpins civic action. The next section, then, moves beyond my 3 D's to address a wider politics of public-making.

C**onnect: the politics of public-making**

Austerity governance does not only concern a politics of debt and retrenchment but also has affective, cultural and psychic consequences. It brings a possible retreat into individualism and defensive localism, and deepens tendencies towards political alienation and disaffection. Within each of the discussions of the 3 'D's above, I have shown how some actors and interventions are attempting to counter these effects by making new connections, juxtaposing different things to create new relationships between them, and generating new forms of thinking and action. Many of those I interviewed who worked in the public or voluntary sectors offer an image of an expansive form of leadership that looks beyond organisational boundaries. Here I want to expand this analysis by focusing on the connective work of public-making: the process of fostering attachments, relationships and a wider public culture, and of surfacing – and acting on – public issues that transcend the boundaries of the local or particular. This is both a means of mitigating the material effects of austerity by fostering protest and dissent against cuts, but is also a route towards addressing the affective consequences of austerity – disaffection, powerlessness and disconnection.

The notion of public-making has roots in the work of Michael Warner (2002), Clive Barnett (2008) and others who have drawn attention to the processes through which publics come into being, and to their fluid, impermanent character. It was developed in an AHRC/ESRC seminar series on *Emergent Publics* that focused on three questions: how new publics might emerge; how new objects of public action arise; and how both are mediated by new dynamics of public governance (Mahony et al 2010). Publics, it is argued, have to be convened: they are discursively summoned up, addressed, hailed as such. That is they are *constituted* through different performative repertoires: through forms of public leadership, through social and political action and through representational practices.

Elsewhere I have discussed public leadership as a form of public-making (Newman, 2011). This is concerned with summoning (addressing citizens as publics rather than simply as consumers or communities); mobilising (fostering dialogue and action

around public issues) and mediating (paying attention to the ways in which institutional practice may constrain or enable different kinds of public to emerge). As the long-term assault on public institutions – the state, the public sector, public regulation and so on – intensifies, so such forms of leadership become more significant in local government, the academy and the professions. It may also take place within the architecture of the state itself. For example, in response to the government initiative to make policymaking more 'contestable', in October 2012 the Public Administration Select Committee launched a consultation paper on how policymaking could be adapted to offer greater opportunities for public engagement.

Public-making is also a product of the work of emerging political groupings and movements such as *Compass, Open Democracy, UK UNCUT, Occupy,* the *World Social Forum* and other gatherings. Many of those I interviewed were participating in such movements, or were engaged in experiments to re-imagine work and the local economy, from creative uses of land to cooperative shops and food production enterprises, or to local LETS schemes and time banks[5]. Others were involved in charities or cooperative enterprises promoting education, health, housing or care as common goods. All such mobilisations were enabled – in part – by representational practices[6]. Much attention has been paid to the development of new social media: citizen journalism, blogs, exhibitions, events, participative documentary production and the use of social media to convene and orchestrate new performances of politics. This continues a long tradition of the use of documentary arts and other visual methods to highlight issues of inequality and injustice, as well as enabling groups to research and take action on the conditions in which they live or work (e.g. Bredin, 2012; Rose, 2012; Stephanson, 2012)[7]. They can, then, be integral to the processes of public-making, but can also foster wider political engagement and action.

These and other forms of public-making, I want to suggest, take on particular significance in the current conditions of austerity. They can be contrasted with a governmental approach that requires individuals to become active citizens distanced

[5] In the same week in which *Policy and Politics* held its 40th anniversary conference in Bristol, the Bristol Pound was launched.
[6] I refer here to forms of cultural representation (symbols, narratives, images and so on) rather than democratic practice, though these are not completely distinct.
[7] All contributing to a 'Creating Publics, Creating Democracies workshop, a collaboration between the Publics Research Programme at the Open University, Westminster University and Goldsmiths College in June 2012.

from, and substituting for, a wider public sphere of state action, public deliberation and public judgments (Mahony and Clarke, 2013). But processes of public-making also generate political ambiguities. London Citizens, for example, has been highly effective in mobilising a predominantly faith based public which has challenged local and national political leaders, promoted the London living wage and brought other benefits; however faith based publics can also be viewed as socially conservative (especially on issues of sexuality and gender equality: Kettel, 2012, Dhaliwal, 2012). Community mobilisers can be viewed as significant new resources and as opening up forms of development and careers for local actors, but also as displacing more political forms of activism (Wills, 2012). Publics, like localities, can be defensive, or can be expansive in their orientation. They can traverse the boundaries of the local or national public spheres and can assemble new forms of collective actor, while disrupting what have traditionally been considered legitimate forms of democratic public. But an engagement with public-making suggests the potential of new methods of engagement to address the affective and cultural, as well as material, consequences of austerity (see also Gilbert, 2012).

Creative labour: the politics of border work

Each of the alternative pathways discussed so far is generated through different forms of border work. Many actors with public and political commitments necessarily have to face in multiple directions, work between conflicting allegiances (personal, professional and political), and try to reconcile governmental and counter-governmental power: see for example studies of how workers perform their own active/activist citizenship in and through their public service roles (Barnes and Prior 2010, Newman, 2005, Newman 2012a, Van Hulst et al 2011). These studies suggest something of the ways in which the borders between government policy and personal/political commitments are worked. Such work – which I argue is a form of creative labour - can lever governmental resources and capacities for 'other' purposes and/or bring alternative perspectives and skill sets into the policy process.

Like the civic entrepreneurs in the Durose study (discussed earlier), the work of participants in my own research showed the significance of brokering and coalition formation, but not necessarily bounded by locality. Their capacity to perform new worlds within the constraints of the material and political conditions of the present flowed from creative engagements across borders, facing in multiple directions and negotiating between different rationales and commitments in order to create

something new or different (Newman 2012b). Of particular interest was the ways in which actors negotiated the 'contact zones' (Askins and Pain, 2011; Pratt, 1992) in which progressive personal and political commitments confronted governmental power, and how they mediated, appropriated – and sometimes bent - government policy.[8] The research was completed in 2011, but I have since been returning to the data, conducting new interviews and engaging with individuals and groups to explore how far their activist commitments and enactments can be sustained in the present, and what new spaces of power may be emerging (see fnote 1).

The analysis shows how activism continues, and how it is unevenly aligned with many of the policy innovations discussed in previous sections. But it also highlights the ambiguities and dilemmas associated with creative labour in these perilous times: how the very words one speaks can rebound as they become taken up in government discourse (Newman 2013c). Those working with and for communities debated how far they could appropriate the Big Society discourse to generate new connections and possibilities, but also wondered whether, in doing so, they were complicit with the rolling back of the state. Those still in public sector jobs described how they were attempting to mitigate the effects of cuts in order to protect the most vulnerable, but also – in some cases – how they were using the imperative of budget reductions to redesign services in ways that they hoped would generate better outcomes. Those who had moved into consultancy, design or research roles were promoting new ways of working that were progressive in their intention, but they also highlighted both the constraints they worked under and their own economic vulnerability. Some were members of groups bidding to take over formerly public 'assets' or to run local public services. These found themselves struggling to secure sufficient resources but also spoke of how the process of bidding was helping foster new capacities, networks and political alliances. Some were engaged in more adversarial forms of politics than had been possible in their state-work in the past, but others were continuing to work across the governmental/activist boundary as policy actors sought out allies to support new government strategies. Some were taking on work as (paid or unpaid) policy entrepreneurs trying to do some of the

[8] Elsewhere I have described something of the difficulties associated with performing across multiple borders and boundaries, and the self -work and emotional labour at stake (Newman 2012b).

‘joining up’ between a stripped down state, malfunctioning market and impoverished civil society.

Their experience offers important theoretical and methodological resources for studying the performance of policy in conditions of austerity: how the effects of cuts are mediated, how new actors take the stage, how policy is translated, how activists seek to use the opportunity of radical change in creative ways. The analysis offers a more nuanced picture of how far the withdrawal of the state is likely to enable new energies to be released and new experiments to be emerge. But it also points to ambiguities and dilemmas. Those filling gaps in state services felt they were doing important work to provide local resources and to foster new forms of civic action, while also being highly ambiguous about how far this supported the climate of cuts. Many were engaging in projects that they hoped would prefigure wider developments, while noting the potential problems of cooption by private enterprise or government policy (Newman 2012a, ch 9: postscript). This takes me to the final section of the paper.

Political appropriations, political possibilities

The experiments and performances traced in the previous sections offer creative routes towards the performance of ‘new words’. But they do so within the constraints of the present policy terrain. Such constraints are of course rooted in the current economic climate but also reference constraints of theory (how we imagine and understand the world) and embedded institutional pathways.

In terms of theory, I want to offer three different contributions. The first concerns the framing of policy as performance. This suggests a lived and embodied conception of ‘doing’ rather than interpreting or implementing policy. It challenges rational linear conceptions of the policy process (see also Cropper and Carter, 2013) and draws attention to the diverse and particular ways in which policy is enacted. It also points to the signficance of human agency, offering a more peopled, relational conception of governance (Jupp, forthcoming). The place of agency in the policy process has tended to be conceptualized through notions of the street level bureaucrat, operating at the front line of service delivery organizations and using their discretion. Alternatively agency has been inherent to the role of the ‘everyday makers’ working in the spaces of community and civil society (Bang, 2005; and see Davies, this issue, for critique). Both, however, tend to be conceptualized as individualised and/or highly

localized actors, detached from wider political and cultural forces. By drawing on Gibson-Graham's concept of *collective* action I have tried to go beyond an individual agent-centred approach.

A focus on policy as performance also suggests how the current policy repertoire draws on, borrows and often reconfigures already existing performances beyond the state. This is not equivalent to government seeking to *animate* such performances, in order, for example, to constitute responsible citizens, to change behaviours or to foster new organisational forms. Rather, it points to how policy draws on a range of *already existing* prefigurative practices or emergent capacities. These may be of longstanding, for example the governmental appropriation of cooperative forms of organising with its roots in the 18th and 19th centuries to promote alternative models of schooling. Or they may be relatively recent: for example progressive practices initiated within a 'coproduced' design experiment or within a particular local authority that are taken up by government as a beacons or pathway for others to follow (what might be conceptualised as 'policy by vignette'.) They may draw on differently spatialised experiments and acts, from the highly localised mobilisations that prefigure wider shifts to a more general cultural or political repertoire that enables new political performances to emerge. They may emerge from oppositional forms of politics such as the Occupy movement (not simply concerned with protest but attempting to configure the new through disruptive performance of politics, education, care and living). But they may also arise from state and non-state actors using 'spaces of power' within governance regimes to open up alternative practices. Such actors do not fall neatly into the specific categories of performance discussed in this paper but tend to work across them. It is not the case that some are compromised and others engaged in a more authentic politics; what is at stake are multiple spaces of power and resistance with which actors engage - pragmatically as well as politically. Forms of public-making may emerge from or by constituted by design and localization strategies. Creative enactments may arise in local activist projects and the work of front line staff. But performance is a concept that helps illuminate how actors work *across* governmental and alternative projects in order to mobilise capacities and resources that might mitigate the effects of austerity.

This takes me to a second contribution: one that points to the tension between normativity and critique. Here the paper addressed the question of how to assess policy ideas and experiments that appear to offer new approaches to solving the social problems of the day. The discourses of better design, of local involvement, of

coproduction, of empowerment, of community mobilisation and active citizenship are all highly normative. And like the discourses of choice and partnership before them, they are difficult to critique, not least since those working for positive or progressive change tend to see their benefits as well as the ideological difficulties they present (see for example Needham, 2011). Much critical academic work in the New Labour years centred around revealing the hidden structures of power and authority inherent in so called 'network' governance. The 'governmentality' literature flourished as a means of showing the ways in which power at a distance was exercised by summoning up new forms of governable subject. However such critical work tended to hinder productive conversations across the academic/practitioner divide. It also often paid insufficient attention to how new governmentalities were mediated and translated by state actors, or how they were refused, inhabited or reworked by those they summoned (Barnett et al 2011, Clarke et al 2007).

The third and final contribution is towards the opening up of apparently totalising narratives, especially those of neoliberalism, to critical analysis. While a useful political slogan, neoliberalism tends to fold everything into one seamless narrative: that of an overwhelming force, able to appropriate all forms of resistance and all alternative rationalities. This squeezes the space of politics and political action leaving us with what Ferguson describes as 'a politics largely defined by negation and disdain' (Ferguson, 2010: 166). However privileging agency or resistance may mean paying insufficient attention to the significance of the neoliberal project. Within the scope of this paper it is not possible to offer a full analysis of neoliberalism (but see Clarke, 2008, Ferguson, 2010, Larner, 2000). In other work neoliberalism is depicted as multiple - and often highly divergent - discourses, actors, practices and forms of political engagement may be aligned, in relationships of dominance and subordination, and cross-cut by emergent forces and tendencies (see Newman and Clarke, 2009; Newman 2012a, 2013a and b). Such an approach enabled me to use empirical research to depict how progressive features of new policy scripts and ideas may be unevenly aligned or coupled to neoliberal rationalities, and where spaces or cracks might open up or reconfigurations emerge. Rather than a singular narrative, of a post-political world heralded by the triumph of neoliberalism, this points to the need (political as well as theoretical) to understand the simultaneous dynamics of retreat and proliferation, creativity and constraint, activism and incorporation.

Conclusion

This paper began by offering critical reflections on current developments in public policy, then has moved through a series of discussions what forms of 'progressive' interventions are possible within the current reconfiguration of the policy landscape. These, I suggest, generate interventions that open up possible futures for public policy and public service. However neoliberal-inclined governments tend to seize on such interventions and bend them to their own purposes. I want, then, to end by widening the analytical framework to ask rather more political questions concerning how far new and emergent performances might be considered as new sites of governmentalisation and neoliberal appropriation. In the process of being taken up in public policy, design experiments and local projects are vulnerable to becoming detached from the politics that generated them, or translated in ways that strip them of their radicalsm. But more importantly for my argument here, they each open up prefigurative pathways to a *post-public* domain of policy enactment. This domain is peopled by the consultancy and research industries (elements of the neoliberal knowledge based economy) as well as by activist groupings, faith based organizations and commercial enterprises, all engaging with the new commissioning agenda. This institutional evacuation of the public domain is accompanied by post-public conceptions of citizenship. For example the focus on behaviour change in many design projects enables responsibility (and blame) to be relocated beyond the state itself. A focus on the local as the source of problem solving offers a more collective conception of citizenship but similarly tends to shift blame away from the incumbent government; hardship and inequality are thus presented as a product of local decision-making. In addition decentralisation prefigures new patterns of spatial inequality, leading to potential resentments, political disaffections and social divisions. Such critiques are however difficult to voice: good design and local involvement appear as inherently normatively desirable, and established state based designs and interventions were, in any case, often highly flawed. Academic nit-picking, then, is often received unsympathetically by practitioners working for progressive change.

Each of the different performative repertoires I have discussed offers a break with – or perhaps helps reconfigure - dominant templates. Each brings into view particular actors, and privileges particular methods; as such they help constitute the field of action in ways that close down some possibilities and open up others. Each may be aligned – or not - with neoliberal rationalities, while also opening up alternative spaces and possibilities. I do I not, then, want to draw an optimistic picture in which new media practices, new forms of public and the expansion of sites of creative

labour will necessarily generate solutions to the policy problems generated by state retrenchment. But the specificities of scripts, actors, places, temporalities and performances matter in terms of what forms of prefigurative pathways might be generated, and what might happens to them as they are aligned with dominant forces. As a result the paper has not attempted to offer normative recommendations about how to do policy differently. Rather, it has been about how to offer an alternative to the politics of negation and disdain by 'performing new worlds' in ways that transcend the institutional and imaginative constraints of the present.

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